

Editorial: Public leadership research: successes and challenges moving forward

Much has changed since 2018, when I became the editor-in-chief of the *International Journal of Public Leadership (IJPL)*. My experience as editor offered me insight into research submitted to the journal with a valuable set of leadership findings. This essay focuses on change, starting with welcoming Tim Mau as the new editor-in-chief. Professor Mau has been a wonderful colleague and significant contributor to the journal as a researcher, peer reviewer and editor of special issues, and for the past two years, as co-editor-in-chief. I have great confidence in Professor Mau's leadership to advance the outreach and impact of the journal.

As I reflect on the past six years as editor, the theme of change is central to my experience in this role. Four observations on change stand out as significant for advancing public leadership research. First, the extent of profound societal and global change over the past six years. Second, public leadership research through networks is changing. Third, the changes in the *International Journal of Public Leadership* through implementing the strategy I set forth as incoming editor-in-chief (Callahan, 2018). Fourth, a changing landscape of "big questions" (Callahan, 2001; Hartley, 2018) addressing the losses of credibility in public sector action, as well as the backsliding of democratic governments (Bermeo, 2022). Collectively, my observations highlight the continued importance of the journal, with the leadership of Professor Mau, special issue editors and the editorial advisory board being central to advancing public leadership research globally to deepen the understanding and inform more effective action.

Profound societal and global change

Most obviously, the COVID-19 pandemic stands out for its profound global impact, with lives lost and significantly varied impacts across nations and communities within nations (Yong, 2020). The introductory essay in an *International Journal of Public Leadership* special issue on the pandemic notes, "... the national and international dimensions of the pandemic are mutually reinforcing and cannot be considered in isolation, developing a compelling case that public leadership needs to facilitate active global engagements across nations in addressing pandemics" (Mau et al., 2021, p. 1). From a public leadership perspective, the two special issues on the pandemic, published in 2021 and 2022, highlight the impact of public leadership in responding to the pandemic.

Furthermore, over the past six years, the connection between public leadership and politics has continued to shape nations and policy arenas. This time includes a changing landscape in which public leadership research cannot be confined to either elected or administrative silos. Still, they should include the interaction between silos (Callahan and Mau, 2023). The impact of politics in all dimensions of the term, including elected officials, appointed and career officials and community and nonprofit leaders, can be seen vividly in the responses to the pandemic, as well as in responses to developing climate resiliency, election integrity, food security and a range of addresses societal wicked problems (Callahan, 2020a, b). The research in public leadership published over the past six years addresses these and other wicked problems through an interdisciplinary approach (Raadschelders, 2011; Callahan, 2020b) needed to deepen the understanding of these challenges, such as complexity, scope and volatility.



Changing public leadership research through networks

My invitation to become editor-in-chief of this journal illustrates how networks of researchers can impact the trajectory of public leadership research. The initial invitation to consider the position emerged from a network of researchers I had connected with at international conferences. More specifically, Alessandro Sancino, an outstanding public value scholar (2022), encouraged me to apply for the position with Emerald Publications. As a valued colleague, Professor Sancino's insights on the journal's potential and the significance of focusing on public leadership favorably moved me to explore the possibility. Several valued colleagues were central to my discussions on accepting the position and starting as editor-in-chief. Initially, I called on Alasdair Roberts, who had considerable experience as editor-in-chief of the highly regarded public administration and political science journal, *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions*. Professor Roberts generously shared suggestions and best practices for me to consider, as did a long-standing leading scholar in public leadership, Professor Montgomery Van Wart. As a founder and board member of the public and political leadership (PUPOL) network, Professor Karin Lasthuizen offered valuable insights and introductions to a worldwide network of public leadership researchers. I am very grateful to *Public Administration Review's* former editor-in-chief, Professor Chet Newland and the current co-editor-in-chief, Professor Jos Raadschelders, for their insights, introductions and reviews. Each of these scholars and leaders changed for the better, both the trajectory of the IJPL and my work as editor-in-chief.

Another positive change facilitated by a network was the generous support of over 150 peer reviewers. These reviewers provided valuable advice and counsel in their reviews of prospective articles. Without exception, the reviewers from varied disciplinary and professional practice perspectives offered constructive feedback in each case, supporting the growth of individual researchers or teams, as well as advancing interdisciplinary research in public leadership. In addition, the approximately 30 editorial advisory board members working in more than 14 countries offered thoughtful suggestions to me in my role, as well as reviews of submitted manuscripts.

In addition to the changes in the network supporting the journal, each special issue connected public leadership with another network. Professor Karin Lasthuizen was a guest editor developing the theme of ethical leadership and the common good (2019, volume 15, issue 4). Professors Tim Mau and Frank Ohemeng were guest editors for two issues on public leadership in the pandemic (2021, volume 17, issue 1 and 2022, volume 18, issue 2). These two special issues on crisis and public leadership extended the coverage of the journal to include a range of public health leadership challenges, as well as political challenges at a national level. The special issue on decentering leadership, with guest editors Sarah Ayers, Mark Bevir and Kevin Orr, suggested the development of research with a focus on "individuals, history, and context at the heart of explanations for public leadership in action" (2021, p. 209). Similar to these special issues, the invited essays connected the journal with a network of international commitment to advancing the rule of law in conflict-torn nations.

Strategy-driven change

In 2018, as incoming editor-in-chief, I outlined the four strategic goals (Callahan, 2018, p. 3) to advance the journal's contributions and provide guidance for the editorial advisory board and me. The four goals with the changes that responded to each goal are listed below:

One, welcomes research on the varied contexts of public leadership throughout the world (Callahan, 2018, p. 3). In response, over the past six years, the journal has published research

from over 40 different countries, with expanded geographic representation from research in nations that had not previously appeared in the journal. In addition, the editorial advisory board added expertise from over 14 nations, with women comprising half of the board members.

Two, welcome the range of qualitative and quantitative methods that advance the understanding of public leadership in contexts throughout the world (Callahan, 2018, p. 3). As a metric of the quality of the research a significant positive change for the journal included qualifying for the SCOPUS Index. This success reflected the quality of the process in reviewing and more. Another metric of quality included receiving an impact factor ranking. Additionally, the number of submissions to the journal increased by nearly 40% since 2017.

Three, exploring the leadership dimensions in developing responses to the big questions and societal forces in the public sector. In addition, the research on public leadership has recognized and continues to study leadership in the context of public sector values as well as within a set of ethical expectations. In responding to this strategic initiative, as editor-in-chief, I invited professionals with long-standing expertise in working to establish the rule of law in nations recovering from conflicts and other challenges. In a thoughtful viewpoint essay, Stephane Jean (2019) draws on his experience at the United Nations to share insights on rebuilding the rule of law in Haiti and West Africa. Similarly, Fron Nahzi (2021) explores lessons learned in working with nongovernmental organizations for institutional leadership in Kosovo and Albania.

As noted earlier, a special issue specifically addressed ethical leadership (2019, volume 15, issue 4) and equity in two special issues on public leadership responses globally to the COVID-19 pandemic. An article explored toxic leadership, with a number of articles focused on ethics throughout the past six years

Four, inviting public leadership research at varied levels of society, including individual skills and behaviors, as well as with the unit of analysis as teams, organizations, communities or institutions (Callahan, 2018, p. 4). The articles published over the past six years cover each of these levels. To my surprise, a number of articles were submitted and published on community-level leadership outside of public organizations. To reach all levels of research, as editor-in-chief, I attended and presented at a wide range of conferences internationally to connect with public leadership scholars, including the Vietnam Symposium on Leadership and Public Policy, International Research Society for Public Management, International Association of Schools and Institutes of Administration, National Academy of Public Administration, American Society of Public Administration, Public Management Research Conference and the Public and Political Leadership sessions. These conferences introduced the journal to a wide range of researchers, a number of whom submitted manuscripts to the journal. In addition to submissions, the journal has increased the number of downloads of articles to over 29,000 in each of the previous two years.

Changing and enduring challenges

The future of research calls for changes, as well as continued research into enduring challenges (Hartley, 2018).

Framing future research as “Big Questions” (Callahan, 2001; Hartley, 2018) can organize research with significant potential for societal impact. A big question is whether the research agenda can address wicked problems in the context of politics and political relationships (Callahan, 2020a). Two major big questions seem most pressing as I complete my term as editor-in-chief: rebuilding credibility in public leadership and supporting democracy. The questions are connected but can also be developed distinctively.

Credibility

Public leadership scholars can research how leaders address the paradox of low trust in government yet enduring support for providing needed programs in the USA (Pew, 2022) and perhaps other nations. In his Pulitzer prize-winning report on the COVID-19 pandemic, Ed Yong (2020, p. 35, 47) finds the cause of public leadership failure in responding to the pandemic in the USA characterized by its shortsightedness and “disregard for expertise” with “... respect for science, logic, and reason.”

In researching how public leaders restore credibility, what leadership lessons can be learned from successful efforts? Recent examples of successful processes for innovative and effective public leadership can be seen in the rapid development of COVID-19 vaccines (Hamel and Zainini, 2023). Another example to research is the application of “agile government” best practices to lead a system “... mission-centric, customer-focused, communication- and collaboration-enabled, and continually provides value to customers and the public ... [and] involves public and customer participation with small teams that leaders empower to take rapid action to deliver timely, transparent results” (Deseve, 2020, p. 15).

Supporting democracy

With empirical data supporting Diamond’s (2022) description of democratic backsliding as “democracy’s arc: from resurgent to imperiled”, an urgent public leadership question in constitutional republics is identifying the role and best practices for public leaders in promoting representative government and addressing democratic backsliding. This research can address the shortfall Bermeo (2022, p. 156) describes, when he wrote: “We know too little about what works or does not work in various institutional landscapes, and how existing democratic guardrails can best be defended.” These guardrails to establish legitimacy go beyond service provision as outlined in thoughtful and well-developed research across various nations by McLoughlin (2015). Research can explore the role of public leadership “... in use of their discretionary authority in ways that are both representative of public wants and effective in a practical sense [as]the fundamental problem of public administration” (Bertelli, 2021, pp. 85–86). Research can address the fundamental question of how public leaders in a bureaucracy can protect democracy against an illicit authoritarian takeover (Bauer, 2023).

At the organizational level, the questions of how public leaders develop representative bureaucracy reflective of the demographics of their democracy, including traditional marginalized Indigenous communities and work inclusively and effectively with administrators from those communities are important. As noted by Althaus and O’Faircheallaigh (2022, p. 62), their research findings “... confirm the desire and ability of minority (in this case Indigenous) bureaucrats to engage in active representation and in doing so bring about policy outcomes that are more favorable to their communities of origin than would occur in their absence”.

At the individual level, more research can be developed on how leaders apply the knowledge gained from experience, leading to one of two basic types of intelligence, crystallized with the skill that facilitates connecting information for understanding complexity and meaning in conditions of ambiguity. This skill set fosters successful change and innovation (Brooks, 2022).

Conclusion

Change has driven public leadership research in this journal. The need for public leadership research globally has never been greater. The continued contributions of researchers, peer

reviewers, editorial advisory board members and guest editors of special issues are essential to advancing public leadership research. I look forward to supporting the leadership of Professor Tim Mau as the editor-in-chief in advancing the impact of public leadership research.

Richard F. Callahan

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